

# *Contemporary Comment*

## *The New South Wales Property Crime Decline*

Garner Clancey and Rohan Lulham\*

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### *Abstract*

On 12 September 2013 the New South Wales (NSW) Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) released the latest crime statistics for NSW. According to these statistics, the substantial decline in property crime in NSW that started in 2001 continues. Falls of 60–70 per cent in the rate of burglary, motor vehicle theft and different forms of robbery have occurred between 2000 and 2013. Little attention has been given to this great property crime decline in criminological and wider media publications. Given the substantial human and financial savings associated with these declines, this limited attention is disappointing. This Contemporary Comment provides a brief (and necessarily limited) overview of recent property crime trends in NSW, Australia and the wider Western world, before giving a tentative estimate of the savings derived from this property crime decline in NSW. Calculated using the Australian Institute of Criminology's costs of crime values (Rollings 2008), our preliminary estimate of the savings to the NSW community related to the drop in property crime in the last 12 years is A\$5.15 billion dollars. We conclude by reviewing some of the explanations offered for the crime decline and urge that greater consideration be given to why these falls have occurred in the hope that such insights might inform future criminal justice and crime prevention policies.

### **International crime decline**

A small but growing number of criminologists, economists and others have in recent years turned their attention to documenting and considering the causes of falls in the rates of various crime types. Zimring (2007) revealed significant falls in major crime types in the United States of America (US). Using Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) uniform crime reports for seven 'index offences' in the US in the 1990s (ie 1990–2000), Zimring (2007:6) revealed the following falls in crime rates: 39% for homicide; 41% for rape; 44% for robbery; 24% for aggravated assault; 41% for burglary; 37% for auto theft; and 23% for larceny. Starting in 1991, these substantial falls amounted to 'the longest decline ever recorded' in crime in the US. While the magnitude of the decline has not continued into this century, Zimring (2007) and more current FBI crime statistic reports (US Department of Justice 2012, 2013) show that crime rates in the US have generally continued to fall or remain stable in recent years.

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\* Garner Clancey, Lecturer in Criminology, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; Dr Rohan Lulham, Research Fellow, Designing Out Crime Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions.

Farrell and his colleagues (2008, 2011) have reviewed similar trends in the United Kingdom (UK) producing numerous publications looking at the different dimensions of the crime decline in England and Wales. Many of the trends in the US have been replicated in the UK. Farrell et al (2008:18–20, 2011:148) demonstrated that violent crime fell by 49%, burglary by 59%, and vehicle theft 65% between 1995 and 2007. Interestingly, it appeared that this decline in the UK started a few years after that of the US.

A recent book, *The International Crime Drop: New Directions in Research*, draws together data from numerous other jurisdictions to determine if the significant falls in the US and UK have been replicated elsewhere. The evidence generally suggests that similar falls have been experienced in Western and Eastern Europe (Aebi and Linde 2012) and Australia and New Zealand (Mayhew 2012) — although the start, nature and shape of the decline vary somewhat across jurisdictions. Moreover, Kangaspunta and Marshall (2012) show that rates of violence against women have not necessarily conformed to these wider declines. Killias and Lanfranconi (2012) also caution against over-estimating the homogenous nature of the crime drop by highlighting that rates of assault, linked to the night-time economy in Switzerland, have risen in the same time period.

While there are numerous problems associated with comparisons across jurisdictions — such as legal definitions, counting procedures, reporting of offences, and the consistent administration of victim surveys — there is mounting evidence that:

overall levels of crime in the Western world have experienced fairly uniform curvilinear trends between 1980 and 2010, with clear-cut turning points situated somewhere between 1990 and 1995. All Western countries about which over time crime survey-based data are available have come out of an enduring crime epidemic around 1990–1995. (van Dijk, Tseloni and Farrell 2012)

It should be stressed that these substantial falls in crime have, however, come after sustained increases in crime in the latter part of last century. Garland (2001:90) noted the following increases in crime in England and Wales:

Between 1955 and 1964, the number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales doubled — from half a million a year to a million. It doubled again by 1975 and yet again by 1990 ... In the USA, crime rates rose sharply from 1960 onwards, reaching a peak in the early 1980s when the rate was three times that of twenty years before, the years between 1965 and 1973 recording the biggest rise on record. Moreover, the increases occurred in all the main offence categories, including: property crime, crimes of violence and drug offending.

Clearly, reporting and recording practices alone could not account for the substantial sharp increases in the rate of crime across many jurisdictions in the latter part of last century, nor the startling decline in recent decades (starting at different times in different jurisdictions).

## **The Australian experience**

Somewhat similar trends have been noted in Australia — significant increases in crime in the latter part of last century have been followed by significant declines in particular offences (eg property offences) in recent decades. With regards to increasing crime rates, Weatherburn (2004:12) observed that:

Between 1973/74 and 1988/89 (in Australia), the recorded rate of household break-and-enter rose 144 per cent, while the recorded rate of motor vehicle theft rose 105 per cent. Over the same period, the recorded rate of robbery rose 126 per cent and the recorded rate of serious assault increased by 376 per cent.

Since this time there have been significant reductions in some offences. From 2001, ‘motor vehicle theft in Australia ... plummeted and had fallen 55 per cent by 2007’ (Farrell et al 2011:151–2). Mayhew (2012), in her analysis of crime trends in Australia and New Zealand, concluded that national [Australian] ‘burglary rates in 2009 were at about the level they were in 1977–78’, ‘the national rate [of homicide] was nearly 40 per cent lower than in 1993’ and ‘the robbery rate was at the same level in 2009 as in 1993’ (2012:83–84). However, the ‘national rate of assault ended up about 40 per cent higher in 2009 than in 1995’ (Mayhew 2012:84). Thus, unlike other jurisdictions, the crime drop has been largely contained to property offences in Australia. This decline also started later than other jurisdictions, with the main decline commencing in 2001 (Mayhew 2012:99).

The national crime decline has not been experienced uniformly across all states and territories. While all jurisdictions recorded a substantial decline in recorded rates of burglary from 2001 to 2009, NSW showed the largest decline (down 63.4%), with the Australian Capital Territory showing the smallest fall (down 32.3%) (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013a). Over the same period, rates of motor vehicle theft fell in all states with greatest falls occurring in Victoria. Robbery declined the most in NSW, but the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory both experienced increases in robbery (with the Northern Territory experiencing the significant increase of 53% in robbery between 2001 and 2009) (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013a).

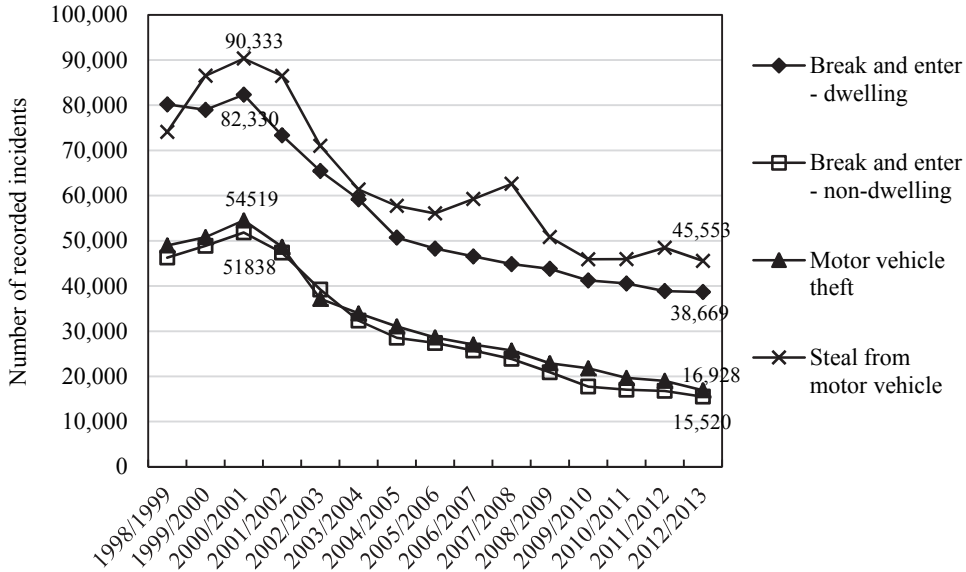
### **The crime decline in New South Wales**

In many respects, New South Wales (NSW) has led the way with the crime decline. In the 10 years between 2001 and 2010, the ‘rate of household burglary recorded by NSW Police fell by half, and the current rate of household burglary is considerably lower than it was 20 years ago’ (Fitzgerald and Poynton 2011:1). Even greater falls have been experienced for other offence categories.

An overview of this decline is provided in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the yearly counts of NSW Police Force recorded incidents for four property offence categories for the last 15 financial years using the latest available data. As shown in Figure 1, the number of incidents peaked in 2000/01 followed by a sustained year-on-year decline for each of these four offence categories (the only exception in the year-on-year decline was a slight rise in steal from motor vehicle incidents from 2006 to 2008). The most recent 2012/13 data also indicates that for most offences the downward trend is continuing. Compared with the previous year (ie 2011/12), there was a 7.6% decline in break and enter non-dwelling, an 11% decline for motor vehicle theft and 6% decline for steal from motor vehicle in 2012/13. Break and enter dwelling was relatively stable (down 0.6%).

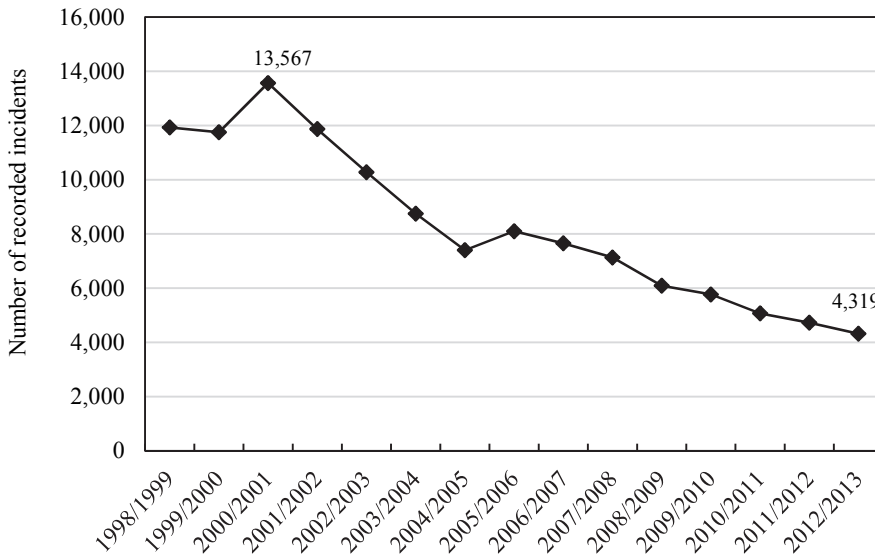
The picture is very similar for robbery in NSW — as shown in Figure 2 — a peak in 2000/01 followed by a sharp and steady decline. In the last year, robbery incidents dropped 8.6%, while since the decline began in 2000/01 it has fallen 63.8%. This fall and those for the other property offences are indeed remarkable.

**Figure 1: NSW Police Force recorded incidents in four major property offences categories for the financial years 1998/99 to 2012/13**



Data source: NSW BOCSAR (2013a)

**Figure 2: NSW Police Force recorded incidents of robbery for the financial years 1998/99 to 2012/13**



Data source: NSW BOCSAR (2013a)

### *Geographical disparity of property crime decline within NSW*

While the data presented above indicates consistent downward trends in property offences in NSW, further work by Weatherburn and Holmes (2013b) suggests that geographical disparities underlie these trends. Weatherburn and Holmes (2013b) explored the geographical differences and similarities in rates of crime across NSW looking at crime rates for particular offences by Statistical Divisions (SDs) and Subdivisions between 2000 and 2012. While they considered a number of offences, figures will only be reported here for robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft and steal from motor vehicle. The following are some of the key findings of their analyses:

- Robbery: falls ranged from 70.8% in the Sydney SD to 21.9% in the Northern SD.
- Burglary: all SDs experienced a reduction in the rate of break and enter (ie burglary), with the largest reduction occurring in the Sydney SD (down 69.2%) and the smallest in the Murrumbidgee SD (down 11.5%).
- Motor vehicle theft: all but one SD (ie Northern SD) experienced a reduction in the rate of this offence. The largest reduction occurred in the Illawarra SD (down 76.8%), which was closely followed by the drop in the Sydney SD (down 76.8%) (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013b:4).
- Stealing from motor vehicles: all SDs except two experienced a reduction in the rate of this offence. The offence increased slightly (up 5.9%) in the Murrumbidgee SD and in the Northern SD (up 1.3%). The largest reduction occurred in the Sydney SD (down 63.7%). The next largest drop occurred in the Illawarra SD (down 48.6%) (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013b:4).

These overall falls prompted the authors (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013b:7) to make the following comment:

The fall in theft and robbery in NSW (and other Australian States and Territories) over the last 13 years has been remarkable. The NSW theft rate was less than half what it was in 2000. The robbery rate in 2012 was less than a third of what it was in 2000. Sydney and other urban areas, however, have benefited much more from this fall in crime than rural NSW.

### **Savings from the crime decline**

A curious aspect of the research (or lack of) in this area is exemplified by the difficulty in finding any publications that try to estimate the potential saving in costs associated with such large decreases in crime. There are now reasonably established techniques for estimating the costs of crime, and while they are not without limitations or contention (Bergin 2013; Webber 2010), they are often used in the evaluation of criminal justice programs. In terms of cost of crime estimates for Australia, the work of the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) (Mayhew 2003; Rollings 2008) is internationally recognised (Cohen and Bowles 2010). We draw on this work to provide some first-look estimates of the potential saving associated with the observed drop in property offence incidents over the last 12 years in NSW.

Table 1 provides Rollings' (2008) per-incident estimated costs for the five property related offences of interest based on the value of the Australian dollar in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Costs accounted for in these estimates relate largely to the costs for the victim. For property offences the costs include 'loss of property', 'lost output' and 'intangible losses', with 'medical costs' also included for robbery. Intangible losses relate to a monetary figure representing the fear, pain, suffering, and lost quality of life for the victim as a result of an offence (Rollings 2008:11). These per-incident costs do not include costs associated with the anticipation of crime, including the range of crime prevention, security and policing measures used by individuals, organisations or governments to reduce victimisation (Mayhew 2003). They also do not include the criminal justice system costs associated with responding to crime by police, the courts and correctional services. In this regard, Webber (2010:5) found that internationally the Australian estimates of Rollings (2008) for property offences were among the lowest, with values for robbery being more than A\$10,000 less than all other estimates for the UK, New Zealand and the US.

**Table 1: Estimated 2005 per-incident costs associated with the five property offence categories**

Offence type	Approximated A\$ per-incident cost
Break and enter – dwelling	\$2,700
Break and enter – non dwelling	\$4,100
Motor vehicle theft	\$6,980
Steal from motor vehicle	\$1,000
Robbery	\$2,270

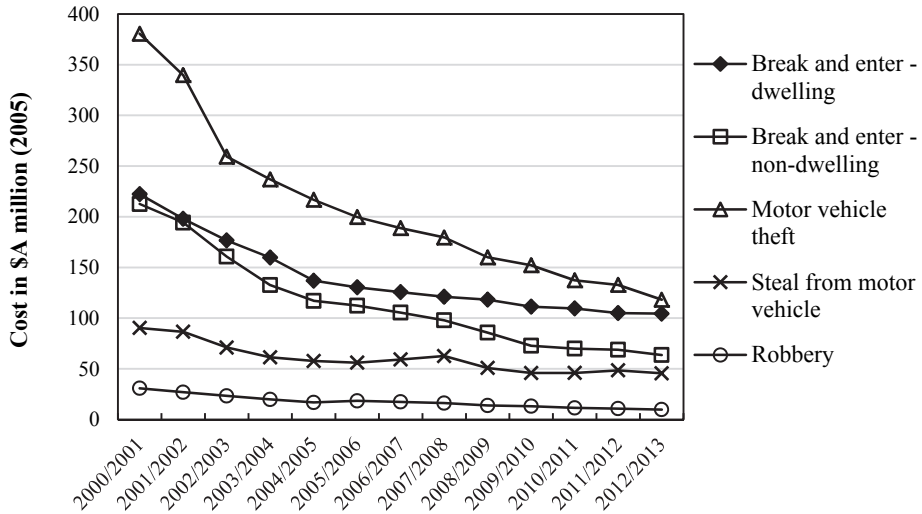
Source: Rollings (2008:24, 27, 29, 31)

To calculate the reduction in costs associated with the yearly drop in these property crimes, we multiplied the per-incident cost by the number of reported incidents that occurred each year in NSW. It would have been possible also to use Rollings' (2008) multipliers for estimating how many actual crimes occur — both reported and unreported. The multipliers have a substantial impact on the saving estimates (ie for robbery it involves multiplying the number of reported robberies by seven). However, as a conservative first estimate, it was deemed appropriate not to use them.

Figure 3 provides a graph of the yearly costs associated with each of the five property crime categories from 2000/01 to 2012/13 in NSW. It clearly shows the large reductions in costs for each of the five offences. For example, costs associated with steal motor vehicle offences fell from A\$380.5 million in 2000/01 to A\$118.2 million in 2012/13. Similarly, costs associated with robbery fell from A\$30.7 million in 2000/01 to A\$9.8 million in 2012/13.

<sup>1</sup> Adjustment for changes in the value of the Australian dollar over time using the Consumer Price Index or the Australian National Accounts Chain Price Index has not been considered here, but is warranted in future analyses.

**Figure 3: Annual cost of recorded property incidents for five offence categories from 2000/01 to 2012/13 in NSW**

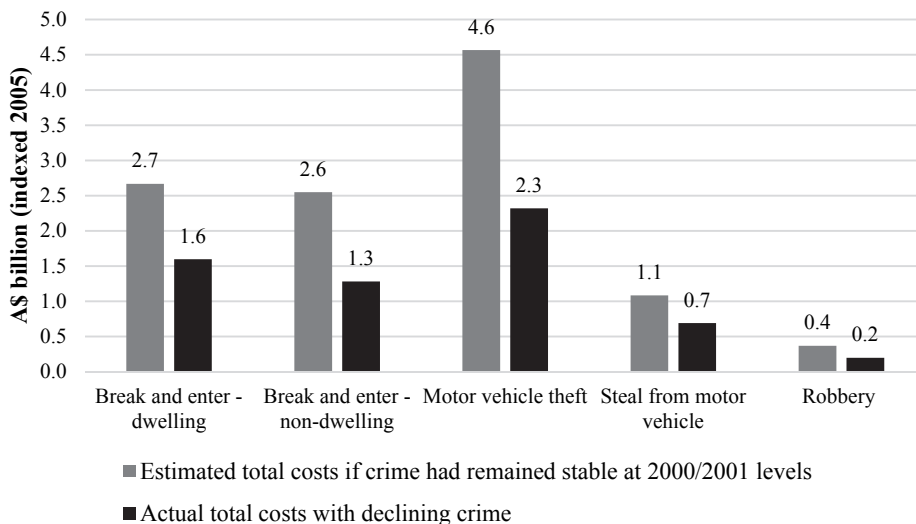


Data source: NSW BOCSAR (2013a)

To illustrate the potential reduction in costs from the drop in property crime over the last 12 years we also compared the estimated costs of crime had it stayed at 2000/01 levels with the costs associated with the actual number of reported crimes that occurred between 2000/01 and 2012/13. Figure 4 displays the results of these calculations for each crime category. As can be seen, the reductions in costs are substantial with savings of: A\$2.22 billion due to the drop in motor vehicle theft; A\$1.30 billion due to the drop in break and enter non-dwelling; A\$1.07 billion for break and enter dwelling; A\$392 million for steal from motor vehicle; and A\$171 million for robbery. It is estimated using the AIC metrics that across the five offences the total reduction in costs — or savings to the NSW community — between 2000/01 and 2012/13 associated with the drop in property crime is A\$5.15 billion. This figure is based on the value of the Australian dollar in 2005 as previously stated.

The analysis provided above suggests that the significant decline in reported property crime in NSW has produced substantial savings for the NSW community. These savings are specific to those associated with the victim due to the way Rollings’ (2008) estimates are derived. It is probable that there are many other savings associated with the prevention of crime and the administration of the criminal justice system not accounted for here. We also did not adjust estimates to account for unreported crime. While further, more sophisticated analysis is required, the descriptive analysis reported here does suggest such research is worthwhile and of potential public interest.

**Figure 4: Total estimated costs associated with each property crime category from 2001/02 to 2012/13 compared with estimated costs had crime stayed stable at 2000/01 levels**



Data source: NSW BOCSAR (2013a)

### Possible reasons for the crime decline

For many, these substantial falls have come as a surprise and perhaps present an ‘inconvenient truth’. Young (2004:23) notes that:

having spent the whole of our professional lives researching why crime should almost inexorably go up (whether due to relative deprivation, broken homes, social disorganisation, breakdown of controls, labelling, etc.), we find ourselves in the infuriating position of the crime rate in very many industrial countries (including the US and the UK) beginning to go down, against all predictions that I know of.

Just as criminological work was dedicated to understanding the rises in crime through the last half of last century, we argue that now similar efforts should be invested in understanding the decline.

Some of the possible reasons for the property crime decline will be briefly considered here.

#### *Economic factors*

Emerging attempts to explain the crime decline remain admittedly embryonic, with numerous explanations having been advanced and quickly condemned. Given the somewhat universal nature of declines in particular offences, attempts have been made to locate structural characteristics common across the Western world. Strong economic conditions, age structure (influenced by legal abortion and changing shape of the demographic profile) and rates of imprisonment have been some of the explanations canvassed (see Zimring 2007; Rosenfeld and Messner 2012). Difficulties arise with these explanations, as strong economic conditions of the 1950s and 1960s were associated with rising crime, and poor economic conditions and high unemployment after the ‘Global Financial Crisis’ have not



necessarily resulted in increases in crime (as evidenced by the stable crime rates in the US). Changing age profiles should have resulted in reductions in crime in the 1980s and rates of imprisonment have not been uniform across the Western world, while (relatively speaking) the drop in crime has been. Zimring (2007) specifically shows the limitation of this argument by comparing the falls in crime in the US and Canada. Unlike the US, Canada did not embrace 'mass incarceration' in the 1990s, yet experienced similar falls in crime. The different timing of the commencement and the size of the crime decline across countries also poses challenges to these explanations.

### *Illicit drugs*

Illicit drug use patterns have also been analysed as a potential contributing factor. Crack cocaine in New York (Zimring 2007) and heroin use in Sydney, NSW (Degenhardt et al 2005; Weatherburn and Holmes 2013a) have been given particular attention. Degenhardt et al (2005) conducted interviews with people using drugs and law enforcement personnel in an attempt to better understand the heroin shortage which, according to Weatherburn and Holmes (2013a), began around December 2000. They concluded that international events (ie invasion of Afghanistan and the impact on poppy/heroin production), border protection and law enforcement practices appeared to have contributed to the sharp decline in the availability of heroin. This resulted in a decline in theft, but a short rise in robberies (Degenhardt et al 2005). While this might have partially explained the steep decline of some property-related offences experienced from 2001, it does not necessarily explain the sustained decline, which continues at the time of writing (NSW BOCSAR 2013b). Similar difficulties arose when considering the contribution of changes in crack cocaine consumption in New York to falls experienced across the US. These difficulties have tended to work against arguments that changes in illicit drug use have had a dominant contribution to the falls in crime experienced in many countries of the Western world.

### *Policing practices*

Attempts to connect the crime decline to policing approaches have largely met the same fate. Zimring (2007) analysed characteristics in New York City to determine if any changes could be linked to the large crime decline during the 1990s. Given that there 'were no fundamental changes in the ecology of urban poverty in New York city during the 1990s' (Zimring 2007:164) and 'the cultural values in New York City's ghetto and barrio neighbourhoods certainly didn't change at the same pace as the homicide rate' (Zimring 2007:208), Zimring looked for alternative explanations. The much hyped 'zero tolerance policing' introduced in New York had been promoted as a possible explanation, however the problem with this explanation is that the adoption of similar policing methods in other jurisdictions did not achieve the same results. It has also been shown that similar crime declines were achieved in other parts of the US where policing numbers and practices largely remained unchanged, such as in San Diego (Greene 1999).

### *Opportunity reduction*

Security and opportunity-reduction measures have been advanced in response to the limitations of both the wider, structural explanations and the narrower more regionalised explanations. As Zimring (2007:209) has noted, 'we don't have to change the world to change the crime rate'. Consequently, changes in opportunity structures might well account for declines in crime.

This explanation works best for property-related offences. There is strong and growing evidence across different jurisdictions that increased security has had a direct impact on

motor vehicle theft (Kriven and Ziersch 2007; Farrell et al 2008, 2011; Bassmann 2011; Mayhew 2012). Installation of immobilisers had a quick and significant impact on motor vehicle theft in Western Australia (Mayhew 2012) and the introduction of anti-theft devices appears to have had an immediate impact on car theft in the US (Fujita and Maxfield 2012:239). Findings from the British Crime Survey demonstrate that 'generally the proportion of vehicles fitted with security devices has increased steadily over time and that the majority of vehicles now have some form of security' (Britton et al 2012:165). The adoption of car security devices mirrored the decline in car theft and was found to have contributed to the significant decline in motor vehicle thefts in the UK.

Similarly, improvements in home security have been suggested as a reason for the reductions in burglary. Together, these improvements in and increased use of security devices has informed the 'security hypothesis' advocated by Farrell et al (2011). This 'security hypothesis' suggests that changes in the quantity and quality of security have played a major part in driving crime falls in most industrialised societies. Moreover, strategies used to reduce repeat victimisation are consistent with opportunity-reducing techniques. The significant focus on strategies to prevent repeat victimisation in the UK appears to have produced positive dividends, with the number of repeat victims of property crime falling more than single incident victims (Britton et al 2012).

Despite the critique of these situational crime prevention approaches by some (von Hirsch, Garland and Wakefield 2000), there appears to be growing evidence of the effectiveness of some of these measures in preventing crime (Clarke 1997). A strength of drawing on this body of work, and the related routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) and situational crime prevention theory, is that these approaches provide a framework for both explaining the increasing property crime in the latter part of last century as well as a framework for the explanation of recent falls. This avoids the trap that Zimring (2007) highlights in relation to selecting variables to retrospectively explain the crime decline.

### *'Debut crimes'*

While opportunity-reducing techniques and situational crime prevention have contributed to declines in particular offences, these approaches are not especially adept at explaining falls in violent crime (which has not been witnessed in Australia like the US or UK). The concept of 'debut crimes' put forward by Tseloni et al (2012:294-6) suggests a possible way that opportunity-reducing techniques can interact with social dynamics to prevent engagement in offending. 'Debut crimes' are those that lead to further, generally more serious offending. Tseloni et al (2012) hypothesise that the greater risks faced and difficulties experienced in committing motor vehicle theft and burglary might have prevented a cohort of young people from engaging in criminal activity. Having not committed these offences, and become immersed in a criminal milieu, they might be socialised away from offending peer groups and an escalation in offending behaviour. Greater exploration is required to verify the veracity of this hypothesis. Nonetheless, there appears to be significant merit in considering the interaction of these and other variables in attempting to explain the crime decline.

## **Conclusion**

There has been a significant property decline across NSW and Australia over the last 12 years. These trends are generally consistent with international trends, although declines in violent offences have not been a feature of the Australian experience quite like the US and UK, and the declines started later here than elsewhere. Despite the size of the fall in

property crimes, they have largely captured little attention, as noted by various commentators:

The consequences of sharply lower crime rates deserve much more attention than they have received (Zimring 2007:vi).

[The] lack of research into the dramatic fall in crime ... is both surprising and disappointing (Weatherburn and Holmes 2013b:6).

It is argued that there are various issues linked to the property crime decline that require further research. More attention should be given to understanding the downward trends in property crime. Understanding the causes — whether they be structural or related to opportunities for the commission of crime — provides the possibility to continue crime reduction, with attendant potential positive political and public policy implications. More detailed analysis of local trends is required to build an understanding of whether the explanations offered to date reflect differences in local conditions.

Better understanding the financial implications of these falls in property crime would also be beneficial. While some rudimentary analyses have been provided here, there are obvious limitations to the calculations. The conservative estimates employed here are based on costs of crime figures from 2005. No allowance was made for inflation since this time, nor has the dark figure of crime (ie unreported offences) been integrated into the calculations. Inclusion of these measures might more accurately estimate any savings. Similarly, no consideration has been given to the impact of the savings on households or government agencies. It is likely that some savings will have been absorbed by insurance companies or government agencies, reducing the overall savings enjoyed by individuals.

Impacts of this property crime decline on criminal justice agencies should also be explored. This is an area that has, to date, received little commentary or analysis. Have, for example, the significant falls in property crimes resulted in fewer people appearing in court? If so, what impact has this had on court administration or correctional agencies? Consideration of these and other questions will reveal whether the property crime decline has resulted in savings in criminal justice expenditure.

Exploration of these issues in greater detail was beyond the scope of this Comment. We eagerly await the release of the 2013 NSW crime data in April 2014, to monitor whether these recent trends continue, to see how the media and criminologists alike greet these data, and to build on the preliminary insights developed here.

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